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Editorial

RELIGIOUS EDUCATION AND SOCIAL DUTY

THE CONVENTION OF THE RELIGIOUS EDUCATION ASSOCIATION

The sixth convention of the Religious Education Association, held in Chicago in February, devoted itself to a consideration of the relation of religious education to social duty. The intimacy of the relation cannot be doubted. Speakers who were to consider such topics as "The Social Conscience," "Racial Adjustment," "Social Legislation," "The Ethics of Industrialism," found themselves naturally defending the relation of these to religious education.

Of course there is a widespread social interest that is not religious at all. Indeed we are at present in the midst of a world-wide awakening of the social conscience, which, to a large extent at least, seems to be independent of the church, and to have arisen outside of the influences of formal religious education. And, on the other hand, there is a very large religious propagandism that is entirely individualistic, regarding social readjustment as an incidental result rather than as a direct concern of religion. But a religious education which turns the mighty emotional impulse of the religious experience into its natural outlet in social service, and relates the passion of the soul for communion with God with the passion of the awakened conscience for social righteousness—alike longings after a real unity of life—will produce the leaders of both the religious and social forces of the future. As Professor Peabody declared, it is the present task of religion to bring the awakened social conscience into relation with eternal law.

There is still a great deal of teaching that has the practical effect of making people think of God as a far-away religious Being, who is especially interested in receiving worship, having his Book read,

his Day kept, and his tithe paid. It is an absolutely transforming conception to come to the idea of God working through the ages in men for social righteousness, calling them to be laborers together with him in bringing justice and truth in the earth.

BIBLE TEACHING AND SOCIAL DUTY

This has a most practical bearing on biblical teaching in pulpit and Sunday school. If the Old Testament is taught as the history of a people who worshiped Jehovah rather than idols, and the New Testament as the propagation of a new creed in the Graeco-Roman world, that teaching has no contact with the awakened social conscience or with the vital interests of the modern world. As soon as the socializing instincts of youth begin the real meaning of this great literature must be presented.

The heart of the Old Testament is not Jehovah worship, but Jehovah's purpose to dwell among men in righteousness. The prophetic law means always social duty. The sermons of the prophets are concerned with justice and generosity in the relations of life as the supreme concern of Jehovah. In the Psalms God is on the side of the oppressed and is going to save them. When the Psalmist longs for his soul to be saved he means that he may have the chance to live a life in this world free from oppressive limitation, exactly what we mean by social freedom.

The New Testament seems less concerned with social duty because of its expectation of the establishment of righteousness through the catastrophic advent of the Messiah. But Jesus' thought from first to last is that men are to be a republic of brothers, trusting in their heavenly Father for all care and good, glorifying him in social duty. In point of fact, the spirit and teaching of Jesus have most intimate relation with the awakened social conscience of today. It is for the biblical teacher to make the relation more and more intimate. And if the apostolic writings seem to favor individualistic salvation in view of a speedy end of the age, yet the broad human love, the hope that their gospel will purify the corruptions of the world, the devotion to duty even in the midst of wrongs, the breakdown of race prejudice and of caste, the equality and love within the Christian community, the glorious universalism that linked Jew and Gentile,

master and slave, learned and ignorant—all these inspire us to the social salvation which is the messianic hope of our day.

CONVERSION AND SOCIAL DUTY

But is not the religious experience essentially personal? Do not the New Testament converts manifest supremely a new personal relation to God in Jesus Christ? Are not the pious in all ages, and not less today, the men and women who rejoice in the removal of the sense of unwholeness and in the blessed union with God that results? Is not Christ the redeemer of the soul? And if all this be true, is not religious education concerned supremely with the production of this God-life in men, compared with which all social activity and fussiness is in vain? Thus with our different points of view we are keeping separate the two mighty forces that must be joined. Conversion is the turning from the self attitude to the Christ attitude. It is the glad willingness that God's will shall be done on earth. It is personal and social at the same time. It is the devotion of a purified life to social duty. It is discipleship to Christ, to love God with him, to keep oneself unspotted from the world with him, to live in the world with passionate longing for its betterment with him, to begin the programme of betterment by the performance of the immediate social duty with him.

So the summons to Christian discipleship in our Sunday schools and pulpits must be broadened. It means the entrance upon a campaign. It means the fight for righteousness in one's own soul and in the world. It comes to the awakened social conscience with the declaration that these hopes and longings for better things are God given, Christ inspired. He who has such holy hopes must not dare to be a sinner himself. Everyone that hath this hope purifieth himself. He who has such inspired longings for his fellow-men must not fail to pray. God is calling such a man in the very experience of social obligation, and through it he may come into the rich religious experience of fellowship with the Father and Lover of men.

THE RELIGIOUS TEACHING OF SOCIAL DUTY

The church must undertake definitely the teaching of social duty. There are many churches in which a person might spend a lifetime, belonging to the school, the clubs, the societies, and never learn any-

thing about his specific obligations to the community in which he was living. The fundamental necessity is knowledge, but the ordinary church member does not know his own town. The church is the place to give instruction regarding the administration of charities, the conditions of the poor, the treatment of criminals, defective, insane, the local jail, and poor-house, the matters of public health, the administration of the schools, etc. And from the discussions of earnest men and women on these questions opportunities of direct social activity would develop. The first social duty is social knowledge. There can be no adequate religious education which fails of enlightenment regarding the conditions of human life in one's own community.

The objection is often made that the church is not even teaching the Bible well, and how can she teach anything else besides? The scant Sunday-school hour is not the only time for such instruction. The Young People's Society, the Men's Club, the Women's Society, the Sunday evening hour in many places, the mid-week meeting (without at all leaving out the opportunity of prayer and religious expression), afford times that are often employed to very little advantage, for this most serious business of the religious life. And in any case social duty demands time, and earnest souls will not fail to find it.

FOREIGN MISSIONS AS SOCIAL DUTY

The church has presented the missionary enterprise as a great opportunity for self-denying effort. But there is need of relating this effort to the social endeavors of our day. Missionary teaching must be socialized. The awakened social conscience will not be greatly interested in supplanting one religion by another. Rightly or wrongly, men will feel that each nation must be allowed to express its religious experience in its own way. But when it is realized that the opening of the world has brought the Caucasian into contact with the less-favored peoples, that he is trading with them, teaching them inevitably his tricks, his frauds, his vices, giving them all that is bad in his civilization, the social conscience demands that he must give them his best also. The most effective missionary education is that which presents the enterprise as a great brotherly endeavor to bring the backward nations into the family of civilization, that they may share our science, our education, our physical advantages, our Christian morality and love, our knowledge of God in Jesus Christ.